

# Biography across the Digitized Globe

*Essays in Honour of Hans Renders*

*Edited by*

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# Conclusion: Biography across Borders – Broadening Biography Studies

Daniel R. Meister

In 1883, the Scottish novelist and biographer Margaret Oliphant remarked: “The art of biography is one of the oldest in the world – if not the first, at least a very early form of literary composition.”<sup>1</sup> Unaware of this long trajectory, when writing in the 1940s, Virginia Woolf suggested that biography was a young art. Literary scholar Robert Fraser quips that “Woolf’s generation ... was convinced that it had discovered biography anew, an illusion similar to the one which causes generation after generation to believe it has discovered sex.” Making the larger argument that it is profitable to compare modern and ancient biographies side by side, Fraser suggests that “the history of biographical writing has been extended, continuous, and self-referential. There exists a long-standing biographical tradition, though it is not customary to call it by that name. Biographers have for centuries learned from one another, echoed or else reacted against one another: exercised and received ... ‘influence.’”<sup>2</sup>

This is all true. But, at the risk of sounding as wrong as Woolf, it still seems that biography as a *field of study* has perhaps not existed as an endeavor until quite recently. That is to say, biographers have been reading other biographies, adopting to new literary trends, and writing updated biographies, but until recently there have been fewer concerted efforts to study it as a field; to, in a scholarly way, analyze and discuss trends within it and to teach various approaches to it. Some accounts of the development of the study of biography

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1 This chapter originally began as “(Situating) the *Fear of Theory* in Biography Studies,” remarks delivered at the book launch of Hans Renders and David Veltman, eds., *Fear of Theory: Towards a New Justification of Biography* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021), online, 10 February 2022. I would like to thank David Veltman and Melanie Nolan for encouraging me to revise and expand the paper for inclusion in this volume.

Critiques of the field are equally old: Oliphant’s reminder of the field’s antiquity, itself now nearly 150, comes in a brief article in which she took exception with James Anthony Froude’s biographical treatment of the Carlyles. M.O.W. Oliphant, “The Ethics of Biography,” *The Contemporary Review* (July 1883): 76. For context, see D.J. Trela, “Margaret Oliphant, James Anthony Froude, and the Carlyles’ Reputations: Defending the Dead,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 29, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 199–215.

2 Robert Fraser, *After Ancient Biography: Modern Types and Classical Archetypes* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), ix–x and xii.

in the twentieth century pointed to 1980 as the moment a “biographical turn” was taken.<sup>3</sup> The idea of a biographical turn, that it was only in the 1980s that historians and other scholars returned to biography, has since been debunked, as the practice of scholarly biography has never disappeared. However, there was a reflexive turn within practitioners of biography that dates to roughly this period, which might explain how the notion of a biographical turn was initially accepted.<sup>4</sup>

Although there were some reflections on the writing of biography published a few decades earlier, from the late 1970s through the 1980s there was an outpouring of writing on the subject from scholars working in various fields including literary studies and the social sciences.<sup>5</sup> The 1990s saw a return to the idea of “Life Writing,” a field which lumped together autobiography, biography, memoirs, and ego-documents more generally. More than just being an expansive tent, however, the field began to increasingly blur the lines between these various genres, and particularly between autobiography and biography – and between fact and fiction.<sup>6</sup> On the whole, however, there was a slight decrease in writing about biography, which did not pick up again until the

3 See for instance Simone Lässig, “Introduction: Biography in Modern History – Modern Historiography in Biography,” in *Biography Between Structure and Agency: Central European Lives in International Historiography*, ed. Volker Berghahn and idem (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 3.

4 According to Danish biographer and historian Birgitte Possing, biography as an “*analytic field*” was created during the twentieth century by scholarship dealing with historical biography.” Possing, *Understanding Biographies: On Biographies in History and Stories in Biography*, trans. Gaye Kynoch (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2017), 21. Italics in the original.

5 For a selection of essays covering the preceding century, see James L. Clifford, ed., *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1560–1960* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962). Another important work from the 1960s worth noting is Paul Murray Kendall, *The Art of Biography* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1965). Major works from the 1970s and '80s include Daniel Aaron, ed., *Studies in Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); Robert Gittings, *The Nature of Biography* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978); Marc Pachter, ed., *Telling Lives: The Biographer's Art* (Washington, DC: New Republic, 1979); James F. Veninga, ed., *The Biographer's Gift: Life Histories and Humanism* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1983); Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact, and Form* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984); David Novarr, *The Lines of Life: Theories of Biography, 1880–1970* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1986); and Eric Homberger and John Charmely, eds., *The Troubled Face of Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1988).

6 This is hinted at by some of the titles of publications from this period: S.G. Bell and M. Yalom, eds., *Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography, and Gender* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990); Liz Stanley, *The Auto|Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto|Biography* (New York: Dover, 1992); and Laura Marcus, *Auto|Biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

early 2000s, a period which would see protracted battles between the now-competing approaches of Life Writing and Biography. But in the Netherlands, this debate heated up much earlier, boiling over in 1990. That year saw separate Biography working groups established by historians, who viewed biography as a fundamentally academic genre; and literary scholars, who viewed it as a fundamentally creative one. This internal split was initially papered-over as subsequent years saw much collaboration between these two groups.<sup>7</sup> But the division and perhaps even animosity between practitioners of Biography and Life Writing would only increase as time went on, and Hans Renders would eventually play an outsized role in these ongoing debates.

As the preface by Richard Holmes and myself explains, Renders joined the fray not properly belonging to either camp but rather approached biography from the perspective of journalism.<sup>8</sup> However, he quickly noticed that biography was lacking recognition as an independent academic discipline and worked tirelessly to bring this about. He did this primarily by establishing and directing the Biography Institute, and later establishing and chairing a new Department of the History and Theory of Biography at the University of Groningen. This, we might say, was a “turning point” in his life, and in the history of Biography Studies in the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

The present volume was occasioned by Renders’ retirement from the university. In recent years, *festschrifts* have broken with their reputation of being “a convenient place in which those who are invited to contribute find a permanent resting place for their otherwise unpublishable or at least difficult-to-

7 Leonieke Vermeer, “Stretching the Archives: Ego-documents and Life Writing Research in the Netherlands: State of the Art,” *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 135, no. 1 (2020): 38.

8 Renders has written about the role of journalism in the development of biography; see especially his “Roots of Biography,” in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing*, ed. idem and Binne de Haan, revised and augmented ed. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 24–42. In another essay, he remarks: “One characteristic that binds all biographers together is their similarity to serious journalists.” Renders, “Biography in Academia and the Critical Frontier in Life Writing,” in *ibid.*, 169.

9 The concept of “turning points” in biography was popularized by the “Turning Points: The Event, the Collective, and the Return of the Life in Parts” conference held at the University of East Anglia, 9–10 August 2013. For a case study exemplifying its use, albeit one that notes it is a “problematic concept,” see Hans Renders and Sjoerd van Faassen, “Biographies as Multipliers: The First World War as Turning Point in the Lives of Modern Artists,” in *The Biographical Turn: Lives In History*, ed. idem, Binne de Haan, and Jonne Harmsma (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 94; and, for an overview of the original conference, see Ruth Cohen, “Report Back,” *History Workshop Journal* 76 (2013): 343–45.

publish papers,” in part by being tightly organized around a central theme.<sup>10</sup> In our selection of a titular theme, my co-editor and I aimed to honour Renders’ international focus and in some ways to pick up where *Different Lives* left off.<sup>11</sup> Arising from a conference of the same name, the essays contained in the *Different Lives* volume, edited by Renders and Veltman, provided an overview of the writing of biographies in various national contexts. *Biography Across the Digitized Globe*, by contrast, grapples directly with the twin challenges of the proliferation of digitized sources and increasingly international, transnational, and cosmopolitan lives.<sup>12</sup>

Contributors to this volume have done the subject proud, with essays examining these themes in various ways and contexts. But I am claiming editorial privilege to flout the rule of sticking to the titular themes. Instead, in the pages that follow, I engage with the broad body of scholarship produced by the “Dutch School” (as I have come to call the constellation of biographers from the Netherlands and abroad who have gathered around the Biography Institute). Wading into the debates that this scholarship has taken sides in (and in some cases initiated), I provide some suggestions of future research directions for the “Dutch School” and Biography Studies more generally.

First, though, a defence. Readers surprised by my willingness to engage in critique and debate, even in a *festschrift*, must be unfamiliar with Renders and his work, in which he has made space for plenty of jousting, especially among

10 This well-known quote is from Endel Tulving, “Are There 256 Different Kinds of Memory?” in *The Foundations of Remembering: Essays in Honor of Henry L. Roediger III*, ed. James S. Nairne (New York: Psychology Press, 2007), 39. For further reflections on the genre, see the first half of Randall H. McGuire, Review of *Human Expeditions: Inspired by Bruce Trigger*, *European Journal of Archaeology* 17, no. 4 (2014): 720–23.

11 Hans Renders and David Veltman, eds. (in collaboration with Madelon Nanninga-Franssen), *Different Lives: Global Perspectives on Public Cultures and Societies* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020).

12 Here we are gesturing to the fact that, due to globalization, “A vast number of people cross national borders each year as migrants, businessmen, students, missionaries, military personnel, social justice workers, teachers, or tourists.” However, there is much debate on how to define each of the terms I have used (transnational, international, and cosmopolitan) and their overlap. Specifically, transnational citizens are frequently defined as people living in one country but maintaining connections to their country of origin and its diaspora, whereas cosmopolitan citizens are defined as being committed less to place and more to supposedly universal principles of justice and democracy. For a discussion of the two, see Cindy Horst and Tore Vincents Olsen, “Transnational Citizens, Cosmopolitan Outlooks? Migration as a Route to Cosmopolitanism,” *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 11, no. 1 (2021): 4–19. See also Lesley Watson, “Situating the Self in Global Context: Reconceptualizing Transnational and Cosmopolitan Identities,” *Sociology Compass* 12, no. 7 (2018): 1, from which the first quote (“vast number”) is drawn.

microhistorians, and has drawn the battlelines with Life Writers, thus proving contentious.<sup>13</sup> I am also fully aware, and wish to reiterate, the fact that, were it not for Renders' work, the Biography Institute he founded, and the broader "Dutch School" that it has grown into, these debates would most likely not be taking place. His leadership, scholarship, and mentorship have inspired not only those who had previously been labouring to bring Biography into the academy, like Nigel Hamilton, Richard Holmes, and Carl Rollyson, but also a new generation of biographers and historians (like some of the other contributors to this volume), who are keen to reflect upon and debate competing theories and methods relating to this field.

To me, there is no greater honour for a scholar than to have their ideas, arguments, and body of work taken seriously and engaged with at length. I do so in the spirit of critical interpretive biography, as elucidated by Renders himself:

The critical interpretive biography ... is based on diverse sources, both personal and indirect. It situates the biographical subject in a particular context and addresses the extent to which [they were] unique in [their] environment. The interpretive biography is usually an unauthorized biography, and the author generally adopts the disciplinary conventions of a historian rather than the techniques of a literary scholar.<sup>14</sup>

Elsewhere he counsels: "A good biography is not a book of praise" – that is, biographers should write neither to "debunk" nor to "worship" their subject.<sup>15</sup> It is this balancing act that I shall attempt in the remainder of this chapter.

In 2007, Ray Monk observed that

the expanding body of academic literature on biography still asks some of the same questions that Samuel Johnson had addressed in the eighteenth century ... Is biography fiction? Who deserves to have a biography

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13 As he recently put it, "That used to be the good thing about the academic world. Even if you don't agree, you can have an interesting discussion. I admit, this is an old-fashioned attitude nowadays." Jana Wohlmuth Markupová, "Biography is with its one leg in the academia and with the other in the public arena ...' Interview with Hans Renders about the crossroads of historical biography, oral history, and microhistory," *History – Theory – Criticism* 2 (2023): 167. I would like to thank David Veltman for pointing me to this source.

14 Hans Renders, "Roots of Biography: From Journalism to Pulp to Scholarly Based Non-Fiction," in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography*, 26.

15 Renders, "Biography is not a Selfie: Authorisation as the Creeping Transition from Auto-biography to Biography," in *The Biographical Turn*, 160; and Renders, "History That Addresses Biography: Ethics and the Vatican," in *Fear of Theory*, 121.



written of them? What details are appropriately included in a biography? Is it possible to know with certainty the inner life of another? What are the moral or ethical responsibilities of biographers towards subjects, social sensitivities, and the truth?<sup>16</sup>

This is a depressing suggestion: in the field of Biography Studies, is there really nothing new under the sun? It does seem that much writing about biography consists of variations on previously established themes and questions, as Monk points out. Or as Fraser put it in his study of ancient biography, “The challenges involved in biography are perennial, and the answers, if not fixed and finite, are at least recognisably recurrent.”<sup>17</sup> Nor has the Dutch School shied away from this fact, acknowledging that their efforts “can be regarded as attempts to renew the previously often repetitive and customary theoretical observations on biography in the field of Biography Studies.”<sup>18</sup>

The questions are not new, nor are the challenges. Take, for example, the proliferation of sources: over a century ago Lytton Strachey remarked that the “vast quantity of information” about the Victorian Age threatened to overwhelm would-be historians and biographers.<sup>19</sup> But even if the challenges are not new, the particularities of each generation’s historical contexts are. In this case, the phenomenon of digitization is new, in that it allows access to an increasing array of sources while reducing or removing the need to travel. But even this is putting it too simply, for not all sources are going to be digitized nor made freely available. As we archivists are at pains to explain to eager researchers, “Digitize everything!” simply isn’t an option: collections are enormous, digitization takes time and money, and archives rarely enjoy generous budgets or sufficient staff. This need for selectivity, in turn, raises a host of concerns about how digitization might be exacerbating already-existing biases – silences, dominant narratives, and power relations – within archival collections, given that it entails the “preservation or reproduction of a selection of an already existing selection.”<sup>20</sup> (Nor even are *these* questions new, raised as they were when the last technological innovation was introduced: microfilm.)

16 Ray Monk, “Life without Theory: Biography as an Exemplar of Philosophical Understanding,” *Poetics Today* 28, no. 3 (2007): 527–70, summarized in Melanie Nolan, *Biography: An Historiography* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 7.

17 Fraser, *After Ancient Biography*, x. See also Possing, *Understanding Biographies*, 95–104.

18 Renders, de Haan, and Harmsma, “Biography as Critical Method,” 6.

19 Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (New York: Random House, 1918), vii. I am grateful to Barbara Messamore for pointing this out.

20 Gerben Zaagsma, “Digital History and the Politics of Digitization,” *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 38 (2023): 836. I would like to thank Heather Home for directing me to

Similarly, while the term “transnational” might be new, the phenomenon is not. During previous centuries of war, imperial conquest, and various forms of colonialism, plenty of lives existed in and between many nation states, some of which were disappearing and others which were only just coming into being. Engaging with biographies of figures from these earlier periods, as well as the historical works that inform these biographies, will no doubt prove fruitful for biographers wrestling with more recent transnational lives.<sup>21</sup>

The Dutch School under Renders’ leadership, and body of scholarship it has produced, has similarly been shaped by its particular historical context. And although the questions it has wrestled with are not new, as I am suggesting, the answers they have proposed have been crafted in response to this historical (and geographical) context. This should always be acknowledged and kept in mind. The question remaining, then, is what to be done with these proposals – or, where to next?

My first suggestion is that scholars of biography studies make a serious and sustained attempt to distinguish between theory and methods, as within the field there is an almost foundational confusion between these two terms. Various definitions of theory have been proposed by contributors to the edited collections produced by the Biography Institute, but there remains no consensus. I have previously used Thomas Haskell’s breezy definition of theory as “a freewheeling recognition that events are interrelated in more ways than are immediately apparent or carry the sanction of common usage.”<sup>22</sup> Renders

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this source, and for her paper on “Digitizing the Archive” (presented at the “The Value of the Archives” roundtable, Department of History, Queen’s University, 7 March 2019), which first opened my eyes to the challenges of digitization.

- 21 For a random sampling of such works, see Achim Von Oppen and Silke Strickrodt, eds., *Biographies Between Spheres of Empire: Life History Approaches to Colonial Africa* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019); Adele Perry, *Colonial Relations: The Douglas-Connolly Family and the Nineteenth-Century Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, and Angela Woollacott, eds., *Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700–present* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); and Ronald Hoffman, Michal Sobel, and Fredrika J. Teute, eds., *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America* (Chapel Hill and London: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1997). I would like to thank E. Jane Errington for introducing me to the latter.
- 22 Thomas L. Haskell, *Objectivity is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 6, quoted in Daniel R. Meister, “The Biographical Turn and the Case for Historical Biography,” *History Compass* 16, no. 1 (2018): 6.

(following Ray Monk) has consistently used a similar but wordier definition, which explains that theories “unify a range of apparently disparate, unconnected phenomena by postulating an underlying principle that these phenomena putatively have in common and can explain their nature or behaviour,” and that this underlying principle is “at least initially hidden from view.”<sup>23</sup> Further clarification on this point will hopefully raise the subsequent question of whether biography – be it a field, genre, or approach to history – even requires a unifying theory.

Second, and relatedly, although *Fear of Theory* rather assumes its thesis, we might well ask if this assumption could be called the *theory* of the fear of theory. And then we might ask: Is this theory well-founded? That is, are biographers universally frightened of theory? It would certainly appear not all: consider for instance much earlier works like William H. Epstein’s edited volume, *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*, published in 1991.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, in *Fear of Theory*, Nigel Hamilton opens his chapter “The Missing Key: Theorizing Modern Historical Biography” with the unequivocal statement that “modern biography is woefully under-theorized.” However, he then goes on to provide a list of numerous works which fit his definition of biographical theory, that is, works that “identify and explore the idea and ideas behind biography.”<sup>25</sup>

The reason for this apparent discrepancy may lie in the metaphor Renders uses to describe how biographers use theory: scaffolding. The scaffolding enables the construction of a building, but once the building is finished, the scaffolding is removed from sight. Its importance to the construction is incontestable, but leaving it up afterwards only serves to obscure our view of the building itself.<sup>26</sup> I suspect that this is the case with many scholarly biographies: a great deal of theoretical assumptions inform the writing of these works, but

23 Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey, eds., *Wittgenstein, Theory, and the Arts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 2; quoted in Monk, “Life Without Theory,” 531; Renders and de Haan, “The Challenges of Biography Studies,” 3–4; and Renders, “The Deep-Rooted Fear of Theory Among Biographers,” 16n3.

24 William H. Epstein, ed., *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism* (West Lafayette, Ind: Purdue University Press, 1991). See also, for instance, Marilyn L. Brownstein, “‘Catastrophic Encounters’: Postmodern Biography as Witness to History,” in *The Seductions of Biography*, ed. Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 185–99.

25 Hamilton, “The Missing Key: Theorizing Modern Historical Biography,” 25, 29, and 34–35.

26 Renders, “The Deep-Rooted Fear of Theory Among Biographers,” 15 and 23. The metaphor of scaffolding is also used, albeit not in specific reference to theory, in Possing, *Understanding Biographies*, 146.

in the end the author labours to make the work engaging and accessible to a wide audience and in so doing dismantles much of the scaffolding – with the result that the building appears as if it sprang up all on its own, unaided.

So perhaps instead of asking the leading question, “Why are biographers afraid of theory?” we might instead ask the more basic question: “Should biographies be more explicitly theorized?” This, in turn raises questions of form and intended audience. As the anonymous reviewer of one of my articles once asked: “What would a theorized biography look like and who would want to read one?” The related question is, of course, what theory? What theory is most fruitful or important for biographers to be engaging with: those relating to truth, power, gender, sexuality, race, capitalism? All of these? None of these?

It seems quite obvious that, in addition to audience, the choice of theory would depend on the biographical subject and their historical context. It follows that there is therefore no one, single unifying “theory of biography,” no hidden principle that explains diverse aspects of *all* past lives under study. As renowned philosopher of history Hayden White put it, “there is no way of finally determining what is the best theory for studying and guiding research into history ... there can be no ultimate theory of history.” Following White, I would add that the questions that biographers have been asking since the eighteenth century are, furthermore, not *theoretical* but *philosophical*, and for this reason biographers would benefit from a close reading of works on the philosophy of history.<sup>27</sup>

But in seeking to provide biography with a theoretical foundation, the Dutch School under Renders’ leadership has, at least since 2010, turned to microhistory. This impulse has been noted by others; as Jana Wohlmuth Markupová remarked in her review of *Fear of Theory*, “when Renders ... aims to find some theoretical background, he almost automatically turns to microhistory.” Nor is he alone in this reflex: when seeking to apply biography to the field of global history, Lauara Almagor, Haakon A. Ikononou, and Gunvor Simonsen – in a move that initially seems counterintuitive – also turn to

27 Hayden White quoted in Ewa Domanska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 16–17. Microhistorians have sometimes engaged in passing with White; see for instance Carlo Ginzburg, “Microhistory: Two or Three Things I Know About It,” in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography*, 162; and Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó, *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 127.

microhistory, which they see as having paved the way for biographers in their field.<sup>28</sup>

Yet microhistory is not a body of theory but rather is a methodological approach, albeit one based upon a theoretical premise, namely that the study of a small part of society can reveal something about the broader society. Biography, on the other hand, is a methodological approach based on the theoretical premise that the study of an individual can reveal something about the broader society in which they lived.<sup>29</sup> These are very similar methods and both can serve as a means of probing, testing, or challenging established narratives, theories, or understandings of the past.<sup>30</sup> Due to their similarities, exchange between practitioners of the two will no doubt be fruitful for both. Still, it remains to be seen how this relationship in any way constitutes the laying of a theoretical foundation under biography.<sup>31</sup> Further, association has shifted to assimilation, as Renders has recently argued that biography is or can be “a form of microhistory,” thus eroding Biography Studies’ claim to be its own scholarly discipline.<sup>32</sup>

A third promising research direction would be an attempt to resolve the tension or paradox between two of the foundational claims in the works of the Dutch School: first, the insistence that biographies are scientific works that

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28 Wohlmut Markupová, review of *Fear of Theory*, 328; and Laura Almagor, Haakon A. Ikononou, and Gunvor Simonsen, “Introduction,” in *Global Biographies: Lived History as Method*, eds. idem (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), 1–22.

29 But even these definitions are too unifying, for there is at least one microhistorian who believes that there is no need to consider the broader context at all (Magnússon), while there are also biographers who believe that the focus should be on the life, without needing to advance the literature on the times. For a critique of the former and a discussion of the latter, see Meister, “The Case for Historical Biography.”

30 As Renders and Veltman put it, microhistory – when its sources are diligently contextualized – becomes “a hermeneutic device, allowing us to interpret historical sources in a new way. To scale down the historical event to a human dimension allows the historian to test the experience of an individual to the grand historical narrative.” Renders and Veltman, “The Representativeness of a Reputation: A ‘Third Wave’ in Microhistory,” in *Fear of Theory*, 193. On scaling, see also Almagor, Ikononou, and Simonsen, “Introduction,” 14–17.

31 Skepticism is growing: Wohlmut Markupová, although sympathetic to Biography Studies’ need for “epistemological ‘allies,’” cagily concludes that the *Fear of Theory* represents an important attempt to find a theoretical background for the field, “even if we do not agree with Renders and Veltman and do not find the relationship between biography and microhistorical research so unchallenging and beneficial for both sides.” Wohlmut Markupová, Review of *Fear of Theory*, 332.

32 Renders, “Template for a Biography: What’s the Sense of Theory,” in *Fear of Theory*, 156.

uncover the *true facts* about a life;<sup>33</sup> and second, the admission that biography – like all forms of history – is inherently revisionist, that is, corrected and rewritten by each generation. As Renders put it:

A biography describes the evolution of a person as well as the context within which that person lived or at least the changing assessment of that context ... a biographer has to come to terms with the ephemeral nature of [their] work and with the certainty that sooner or later a subsequent biographer will write something partly or even totally different about [their] hero. Some biographers believe that they are working in the field of literature and therefore they think they write works that will stand the test of time forever. That is a misconception ... Unlike a (successful) work of art, a biography has an expiration date that is related to the topicality of the context. The skill of a biographer consists of reconstructing the life of a certain person while at the same time clearly representing the parameters of the age in which [they] work.<sup>34</sup>

Other biographers are acutely aware of biography's increasingly revisionist imperative. As Kirstie Asmussen argues, "Revision has become synonymous with the writing of biographies, particularly as new information and fresh material come to light."<sup>35</sup> In short, biography as corrective to *biography*, not just as a corrective to history, implies the existence of conflicting interpretations of the same life.<sup>36</sup> This, in turn, raises additional questions about contradictions of the biographical subjects themselves, both in their written works as well as the ways in which they understood themselves. Ultimately,

33 As early as 2007, Hamilton positioned biography as "one of the embattled front lines in the struggle between society's notions of truth and imagination." Nigel Hamilton, *Biography: A Brief History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1. However, biography-as-truth was most forcefully argued in Hamilton, "Truth, Lies, and Fake Truth: The Future of Biography," in *Different Lives*, 12–20. This thesis also shaped Nigel Hamilton and Hans Renders, *The ABC of Modern Biography* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

34 Renders, "Biography in Academia and the Critical Frontier in Life Writing," in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography*, 170.

35 Kirstie Asmussen, "Biographical Revisionism: Hubert Foss's Conflicting Portrayals of Vaughan Williams," *Journal of Musicological Research* 38, no. 3–4 (2019): 289.

36 See Nigel Hamilton, "Biography as Corrective," in *The Biographical Turn*, 15–30; Renders' subsequent piece, "Biography as a Correction to History," *Les Grandes Figures historiques dans les lettres et les arts* 2 (2017): 31–37; but also Eric Palmen, "Beyond Verification and Falsification: Biography as a Go-Between of Historical Truth," in *Fear of Theory*, 103–13.

pursuing this thread might push biographers to engage more fully with the body of postmodern theories that they might otherwise wish to avoid.

A fourth avenue would be to build bridges with other related fields and sub-fields (aside from microhistory), especially oral history and narrative studies.<sup>37</sup> More broadly, however, I think that there ought to be a rethinking of the relationship between Biography Studies and other approaches to writing lives.<sup>38</sup> As previously discussed, the Dutch School of Biography has set itself in opposition to Life Writing on three grounds: the latter's lack of academic rigour, lack of historical context, and focus on marginalized subjects.<sup>39</sup> But these are not inseparable parts of a singular, coherent movement. Indeed, there are varying approaches to Auto/Biography or Life Writing.<sup>40</sup> For some, such as Marlene Kadar, Life Writing is indeed a self-consciously critical and feminist praxis.<sup>41</sup> However, other practitioners bring a diverse range of theoretical and practical approaches and desired outcomes.

The critique of contemporary approaches to writing lives on the grounds of scholarly rigour certainly has merit; I share the Dutch School's contention that "biographies" of objects, animals, cities, or ideas are nothing of the sort and "appear designated 'biography' solely in order to profit from all the attention which exists for the genre."<sup>42</sup> I also agree that biographers ought to stick to scholarly norms: root their claims in evidence, cite this evidence so that other scholars may verify it, to be honest about their conjectures, and not insert any outright fiction into their accounts. However, I think it is apparent that the third critique – regarding the subjects that Life Writers select – does not hold up well when exposed to closer scrutiny.

37 This suggestion, about oral history in particular, was made in Wohlmuth Markupová, review of *Fear of Theory*, 332.

38 Not just because, for all their opposition to it, biographers seem just as happy as others to engage in autobiographical reflection – as some chapters in this very volume demonstrate – thus demonstrating an implicit recognition of the value of such an approach.

39 On the former critique, see Renders and de Haan, "The Challenges of Biography Studies," 2–4; and on the latter, Renders, "Biography in Academia and the Critical Frontier in Life Writing." However, in a subsequent essay, Renders, de Haan, and Harmsma called for investigations of both "the proverbial 'dead white males' and the marginal figures of the past." See their "Biography as Critical Method," in *The Biographical Turn*, 6.

40 For a helpful introduction to the field, which places Canada in the international context, see Julie Rak, "Widening the Field: Auto/biography Theory and Criticism in Canada," in *Auto/Biography in Canada: Critical Directions*, ed. idem (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 1–29, esp. 13–20.

41 In addition to Kadar's essay in this volume, see also her "Coming to Terms: Life Writing – from Genre to Critical Practice," in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography*, 195–205.

42 Hans Renders and Binne de Haan, "The Challenges of Biography Studies," in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography*, 1.

Certainly, some Life Writers choose, as part of an overt, “ideological agenda,” to focus on marginalized subjects. As I understand it, they are indeed working to “correct history,” to rectify decades, even centuries, of biases, omissions, and erasures – and to my mind this is an admirable pursuit.<sup>43</sup> But it is disingenuous to suggest that Biography Studies is not ideologically oriented as well. Biography Studies is not a neutral or value-free discipline. Rather, it operates from unstated but deeply held assumptions about which people, typically politicians and artists or other culturally significant figures, are deserving of full-length biographies.<sup>44</sup> Biographers need to accept that their works will never be “devoid of ideology.” In other words, they need to grasp the critical insight offered by the historian Thomas Haskell: objectivity is not neutrality. We can approach the past with “detachment, honesty, and fairness,” while recognizing that it is impossible for us to approach our subjects completely neutrally, that is, without political commitments and without any passion.<sup>45</sup>

Further, the idea that somehow biographies of traditional cultural and political figures are going to be crowded out, or even silenced, by Life Writers and their preferred subaltern subjects is – to be blunt – fanciful. How many of the (auto)biographical sketches in this very volume are of cisgender, heterosexual men racialized as “white”? As my own research on Canada has shown, the overwhelming majority of historical biographies continue to take (“white”) men, most often politicians and artists, as their subjects.<sup>46</sup> More expansively, Birgitte Possing undertook an international study examining biographies reviewed in selected academic journals. She found that only 15% of these published biographies had women protagonists, up from a previous low of 8% (though there are notable national variations).<sup>47</sup> So, this fear of crowding out is baseless.

But why this is a concern in the first place? This is the more important question. For if the theoretical assumption upon which Biography is built is

43 Hans Renders, “The Limits of Representativeness: Biography, Life Writing, and Microhistory,” in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography*, 133.

44 As Marlene Kadar points out in her chapter in this volume, “Biographical studies tend to interpret and illuminate subjects who are already remembered by history because they fulfilled a role that is lauded or at least understood by those who have easier access to privileges, including class, education, leisure, rest, etc.”

45 Renders, “Biography is not a Selfie,” 162 (see also Renders, “History That Addresses Biography,” 115); and Thomas L. Haskell, “Objectivity is Not Neutrality: Rhetoric vs. Practice in Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream*,” *History and Theory* 29, no. 2 (May 1990): 137.

46 Meister, “Historical Biography in Canada,” in *Different Lives*, esp. figs. 2 and 3 (on 36 and 37, respectively).

47 Possing, *Understanding Biographies*, 52, but see 37–67 for a detailed treatment. Possing’s study examined the United States, England, France, Germany, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark.



that the study of a single life is of value, then why would biographers want to arbitrarily limit the field to only the straight, "white," rich, and powerful? The absurdity of this position only deepens when one considers that some of the most influential figures in the development of the art of biography were members of groups that the Dutch School have previously dismissed as the preserve of Life Writing, such as women (Virginia Woolf) and LGBTQ peoples (Woolf again, as well as Lytton Strachey).<sup>48</sup>

To put it another way, biographers of marginalized figures perhaps take the premise of the field more seriously than would-be gatekeepers. Consider, for instance, the labour and persistence of the biographers of enslaved people, whose subjects in many cases cannot even be identified by name: a recent biographical dictionary in the field contains over four hundred such entries. As one reviewer argued: "That so many people inhabit a biographical dictionary as 'Unnamed' is an important research finding. It speaks to the disregard for humanity that made slavery possible, and to the power of simply breaking archival silence by pointing out what is not there, and why."<sup>49</sup> In sum, biography can, and perhaps should be, "an element of democratisation in a globalised community. By means of biography we give increasing numbers of individuals a place in history, a voice, visibility, and a contemporary response."<sup>50</sup> Without ignoring the genuine questions of representation, authority, voice, and appropriation, biographers could do worse than to begin with Richard Holmes' conception of biography a handshake, which opened this volume. As he put it, biography is not just "a handshake across time, but also across

48 See for instance Renders, "Biography in Academia and the Critical Frontier in Life Writing," 169–70; cf. Rhiel and Suchoff, *The Seductions of Biography*. On sexuality in the Bloomsbury Group, to which Strachey and Woolf belonged, see Brenda S. Helt and Madelyn Detloff, eds., *Queer Bloomsbury* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); and on queer biography more generally, see Martin Duberman, ed., *A Queer World: Reading Lives, Writing Cultures* (New York: NYU Press, 1997), Part III; and a/b: *Auto/Biography Studies* 15, nos. 1 and 2 (2000), special issues on "Autobiographical Que(e)ries."

49 Harvey Amani Whitfield, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of Enslaved People in the Maritimes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022); and Nina Reid-Maroney, review of *Biographical Dictionary of Enslaved People in the Maritimes* by Harvey Amani Whitfield, *H-Biography* (August 2022), <https://networks.h-net.org/node/6709654/reviews/10642127/reid-maroney-whitfield-biographical-dictionary-enslaved-black-people>. See also Whitfield, "Name Unrecorded," in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 4 (University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2024), [http://biographi.ca/en/bio/name\\_unrecorded\\_4E.html](http://biographi.ca/en/bio/name_unrecorded_4E.html). This is the first such entry to appear in the DCB, though additional entries have been commissioned.

50 Possing, *Understanding Biographies*, 9.

cultures, across beliefs, across disciplines, across genders, and across ways of life.”<sup>51</sup>

Now, practitioners of Life Writing are entirely correct when they assert that attempting to write the lives of anyone other than upper-class men presents a host of challenges, which is perhaps why there is no sign of the demographic trend of published scholarly biographies changing any time soon. But this reality should not lead biographers to reject any attempt to write these lives. Instead, it should encourage reflection on the field itself and inspire creativity and innovations.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps for this reason, feminist biographers have in fact been more apt to engage in deeply reflective and critical evaluations of the art of biography, as there is a host of literature in this vein.<sup>53</sup> In other words, if there is a fear of theory among biographers, feminist biographers are seemingly immune, and the questions they raise are well worth wrestling with. If a biography must be able to tell the story from life to death, with both the inside (emotions, thoughts) and the outside (actions, accomplishments) meticulously documented, well, that considerably narrows the list of potential subjects, as not many people have their records so carefully preserved. How then do we approach gaps in the documentary evidence? What do we make of the scanty records that do exist, these scraps, traces, fragments, or bio-bits?<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Holmes, *This Long Pursuit*, 17.

<sup>52</sup> I have argued this point elsewhere, see Meister, “Historical Biography in Canada,” 38. Important works in this vein include Peter Read, Frances Peters-Little, and Anna Hae-bich, eds., *Indigenous Biography and Autobiography* (Canberra: ANU E-Press, 2008); Lisa A. Lindsay and John Wood Sweet, eds., *Biography and the Black Atlantic* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); and Whitfield, *Biographical Dictionary of Enslaved Black People*.

<sup>53</sup> Some important titles include Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Norton, 1988); Sara Alpern, Joyce Antler, Elisabeth Israels Perry, and Ingrid Winther Scobie, eds., *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Stanley, *the Auto/Biographical I*; Linda Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women's Lives: The New Biography* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Pauline Polkey, ed., *Women's Lives into Print: The Theory, Practice, and Writing of Feminist Auto/Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Susanna Scarparo, *Elusive Subjects: Biography as Gendered Metafiction* (Leicester, UK: Troubador, 2005); and Bronwyn Davies and Susanne Gannon, *Doing Collective Biography* (New York: Open University Press, 2006).

<sup>54</sup> On traces and fragments as “member-genres in the taxonomy of auto/biographical practices,” see Marlene Kadar, “The Devouring: Traces of Roma in the Holocaust: No Tattoo, Sterilized Body, Gypsy Girl,” in *Tracing the Autobiographical*, ed. idem, Linda Warley, Jeanne Perreault, and Susanna Egan (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 223–46, as well as her chapter in this volume. On “bio-bits,” see Craig Howes's chapter in this volume.

And what do we call attempts to write such lives – are they not biographies? In short, there is middle ground on which Biographers and Life Writers can fruitfully meet and engage in respectful debate about the ways in which we might approach the challenge of writing, in a scholarly way, the lives of marginalized figures, or even prominent figures who left scanty records.<sup>55</sup>

At the close of the *Different Lives* conference in 2018, Nigel Hamilton – with his usual enthusiasm – remarked that such an event should be held every few years. And he is right: the work that Hans Renders started at the Biography Institute must continue to be as ambitious and international as it has been under his leadership. As Renders put it a decade ago now, “Biography can receive a different accent in every country, but there exists at the same time a need for an international debate,” and this debate is one that he has consistently fostered.<sup>56</sup>

I have argued that, in order to remain a vital field, Biography Studies must retain its existing international and comparative focus but that it must also put down arms and engage with other scholars: crossing not just borders of geography, but borders of theory, methods, and disciplines. Indeed, biographers can and should deepen their theoretical approaches, acknowledging the inherently revisionist nature of their discipline; broaden their methodological approaches; and expanding their range of potential subjects and sources of evidence – all while still staying true to the historical method. Instead of standing alone as the last bastion of empiricism in an age of post-structuralism, deconstructionism, and postmodernism; instead of remaining the domain of European (male, “white”) cultural figures only; and instead of engaging in an anxious, perpetual, and fruitless hunt for an underlying body of theory, I see the future of the broad field of Biography Studies in continuing the spirit of *Different Lives*, an approach that might be called “comparative biography.” Richard Holmes has used this term to describe two related but distinct processes, one of examining successive biographies of the same individual, and, secondly, of comparing how the writing of biography varies

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55 Finally, I would add that valuable contributions to these discussions and debates can be made scholars of ancient biography, who contend that “its problems, dilemmas and opportunities mirror those which later biographers have faced.” Fraser, *After Ancient Biography*, viii. See also Koen de Temmerman, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). These classicists and literary scholars are citing modern scholars of biography, but unfortunately the reverse is rarely true; for one limited exception, see Hamilton, *Biography: A Brief History*, chap. 1.

56 Renders and de Haan, “The Challenges of Biography Studies,” 1.

from historical period to historical period.<sup>57</sup> It is this practice that Renders has so successfully enabled and promoted through his tireless efforts to bring together biographers from around the world to discuss the state of their art. To him we all owe a great deal.

*Dank u wel, Hans.*

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57 Holmes, *This Long Pursuit*, 57–58, as explicated in Fraser, *After Ancient Biography*, viii. The latter sense is also referred to as "biography as historiography"; see Nolan, *Biography: An Historiography*; and Meister, Review of *Biography: An Historiography* by Melanie Nolan, *Australian Journal of Biography and History* 8 (2024): 227–31.

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